



Venezuela

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or public order, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected the practice of religious freedom; however, religious groups, like others that criticized the Government, were subject to harassment and intimidation during the reporting period. There were some efforts by the Government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, social, and political areas.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic incidents occurred during the reporting period.

The U.S. Government raises religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 352,144 square miles and a population of 28.4 million. According to government estimates, 92 percent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic and the remaining 8 percent Protestant, a member of another religion, or atheist. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimates that evangelical Protestants constitute 10 percent of the population.

There are small but influential Muslim and Jewish communities. The Muslim community of more than 100,000 consists primarily of persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area. The Jewish community numbers approximately 13,000 and is centered in Caracas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or public order, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to religious organizations, and promoting awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR to have legal status as a religious organization. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, with the additional provision that groups serve the community's social interests. On June 26, 2008, the Reformist Catholic Church of Venezuela

announced its formation. Roman Catholic bishops alleged that the Government was funding the new church in an attempt to divide the Roman Catholic Church in the country and promote President Chavez's socialist agenda.

A 1964 concordat governs relations between the Government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church. All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations. The Government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help the poor, although the subsidies were reduced in some states. The Government continued to fund the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) at reduced levels. Other religious groups are free to establish their own schools. There were reports of government funding for certain evangelical groups, although much of this was related to social projects implemented via the Government's social programs.

The Government observes Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Christmas as national holidays.

Foreign missionaries require special visas. Missionaries expressed concern about refusal rates for first-time religious visas and, less frequently, renewals. Some missionary groups also complained that the religious visa process was prone to delays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected the practice of religious freedom; however, religious groups, like others that criticized the Government, were subject to harassment and intimidation during the reporting period. The Constitution forbids the use of religion to avoid obeying the law or to interfere with the rights of others. There were efforts by the Government to limit the political influence of the Catholic Church and missionary groups in certain geographic and social areas. Since the December 2006 reelection of President Chavez, leaders from a number of religious groups noted that the Government was less open to dialogue.

During the reporting period leaders within the Catholic Church issued several statements critical of the country's democracy and human rights record. In response, President Chavez and other government officials on multiple occasions publicly criticized specific Catholic bishops and the Papal Nuncio. On April 6, 2009, the CEV issued a critical communiqué warning that the country's democratic system was "at risk of collapse." In response, President Chavez insinuated in his newspaper column that the Catholic Church should be held partially responsible for events surrounding a failed coup attempt in 2002. On April 13, 2009, unknown assailants robbed the Caracas headquarters of the CEV and stole a laptop computer and several computer monitors.

On December 26, 2008, following the Archbishop of Caracas Cardinal Jorge Urosa's criticism of a constitutional amendment that would eliminate term limits, President Chavez called a talk show on a state television network and accused Cardinal Urosa of abusing his position and behaving like a member of the opposition. The following day at an appearance at a public hospital, President Chavez publicly claimed the Cardinal belonged to the "oligarchy" and suggested that the Cardinal was manipulating the public to oppose the February 15, 2009, referendum to eliminate term limits. In January 2009 the CEV issued a communiqué questioning the legality and legitimacy of that referendum.

On October 16, 2008, the CEV issued a statement condemning political polarization in the run-up to November 23, 2008, state and local elections and expressing concern over the deteriorating human rights situation in the country, specifically regarding 26 decree-laws President Chavez had issued on July 31, 2008. Following the release of the CEV statement, the government-backed *Diario Vea* newspaper ran numerous critical editorials against the Catholic bishops.

Following the 2007 decision of the Vatican to grant political asylum to opposition student leader Nixon Moreno, who had sought refuge in the Mission of the Holy See in Caracas, and the subsequent decision of the Government to deny Moreno safe passage out of the country, the Holy See Mission was subjected to sporadic teargas attacks. On January 19 and February 5, 2009, unknown perpetrators threw tear gas canisters at the Holy See Mission. On March 9, 2009, Moreno fled the Holy See Mission in Caracas, reportedly fearing that government supporters would forcefully extricate him from the diplomatic mission. Following Moreno's disappearance, in March 2009 *Diario Vea* featured numerous articles and political cartoons accusing the Papal Nuncio and the Catholic Church of complicity in Moreno's departure, but did not offer proof.

Government-affiliated media outlets made numerous anti-Semitic statements during the reporting period. The hosts of *La Hojilla*, a pro-Chavez talk show on official government television, made recurring anti-Semitic slurs, and *Diario Vea* regularly published anti-Semitic comments. These media outlets accused rabbis and Jewish businesspersons of conspiring to destabilize the Government and of supporting Israel's military incursion into the Gaza Strip. Government-sponsored media outlets published anti-Jewish caricatures and political cartoons on numerous occasions. The local Jewish community expressed strong concerns that such statements and publications fostered anti-Semitism, creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust of the community. In August 2008 President Chavez met with the country's Jewish leaders and pledged to work with them to combat anti-Semitism, irrespective of world events.

In December 2008 and January 2009 there was a marked increase in anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic graffiti in Caracas and other cities. During the reporting period, the country's Jewish organizations received numerous telephone threats. On January 14, 2009, the Government announced its suspension of diplomatic relations with Israel and simultaneously called on the international community to punish Israeli leaders via the International Criminal Court for military action in Gaza.

The suspension of diplomatic relations further escalated anti-Semitism in the country. During the late night/early morning hours of January 30-31, 2009, armed gunmen vandalized the Tiferet Israel synagogue, the oldest synagogue in Caracas, and held the building for several hours. The attackers ransacked administrative areas and files, and wrote anti-Semitic graffiti on the interior walls. Following a February 4, 2009, meeting between the Confederation of Jewish Associations in Venezuela (CAIV) and Foreign Minister Maduro, government officials publicly condemned the attack. On February 5, President Chavez personally phoned the president of CAIV to condemn the attack and promised to guarantee the safety of the Jewish community. On February 9, 2009, criminal charges were filed against 11 persons alleged to have perpetrated the attack, including several police officers.

The Government continued to prohibit foreign missionary groups from working in indigenous areas. On November 4, 2008, the Supreme Court ruled that the rights of the New Tribes Mission (NTM) to conduct its social programs among indigenous tribes were not violated in 2005 when the Ministry of Interior and Justice required the NTM to remove its personnel and abandon its property in all indigenous areas in the country. In 1953 the Government granted the NTM permission to conduct social programs among indigenous tribes.

The military chaplain corps consisted almost exclusively of Catholic priests. Although armed forces members of other religious groups were allowed to attend services of their faith, they did not enjoy the same access to clergy. Authorities tightly regulated and limited access of evangelical chaplains to prisons.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or

illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Jewish leaders reported numerous incidents throughout the reporting period of anti-Semitism including graffiti, slurs, political cartoons, and media commentary. On June 17, 2009, protestors spray-painted swastikas on the official residence of opposition Governor Capriles of the State of Miranda. On February 26, 2009, unknown assailants threw a small explosive device at a Jewish community center in Caracas. Government officials promised to investigate and pursue those responsible. No suspects had been charged at the end of the reporting period. On January 23, 2009, anti-Semitic banners were displayed in the Parque de las Ballenas in the city of Maracay.

In the weeks prior to the January 30, 2009, attack on the Tiferet Israel synagogue, anti-Semitic graffiti appeared throughout the city of Caracas. On January 8, 2009, vandals spray-painted the exterior of the Tiferet Israel synagogue, and anti-Semitic graffiti began to appear on numerous buildings, monuments, and squares across Caracas; on January 22, 2009, individuals spray-painted additional graffiti.

Non-Jewish religious groups generally experienced fewer problems with societal discrimination, with some notable exceptions. In November 2008 individuals spray-painted a Catholic Church in Barinas with offensive anti-Catholic and pro-government graffiti. In September 2008 and again in March 2009 thieves broke into the country's largest mosque, the Ibrahim Al-Ibrahim, ransacking the offices and stealing jewelry, computers, and other objects.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government raises religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy representatives had only limited access to government officials. Embassy officials maintained close contact with various religious communities. The U.S. Chargé d'Affaires regularly met with religious authorities. On February 4, 2009, during the regular Permanent Council meeting of the Organization of American States, the United States denounced the attack against the Tiferet Israel synagogue.